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SUBJECT: LEBANON: LAF COMMANDER SEES CRUCIAL MOMENT FOR LAF
IN FIGHT AGAINST FATAH AL-ISLAM

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Section 1.4 (d)
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SUMMARY

11. (C) On May 25, the Ambassador met with Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Michel Sleiman. Sleiman indicated that it was important for the LAF to succeed in its fight with Fatah al-Islam at the Nahr el-Bared Palestinian refugee camp, not only for its own credibility, but for Lebanon as a nation. He stated that given the militancy of Fatah al-Islam, there are few options except to go into the camp and "kill the leaders" of group. He was confident that the LAF had "wide" support for taking military action in the camp, but he had doubts about some political leaders who may use the situation to criticize the LAF as a means of challenging the Siniora government for their own ends. Sleiman recognized the strong USG support and expressed his appreciation for the quick response in providing much needed 5.56mm ammunition to the LAF and for the ongoing USG efforts to secure 105mm tank rounds and 155mm artillery rounds. End Summary.

GENERAL SLEIMAN SEES CRUCIAL MOMENT FOR LAF

12. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Defense Attache and Poloff, met with General Michel Sleiman at LAF headquarters in Yarze on May 25. The Ambassador led off with the importance that the USG places on LAF success in its battle against Fatah al-Islam at the Nahr el-Bared camp. The USG sees the LAF confrontation with Fatah al-Islam not only as a battle for the sovereignty of Lebanon, but crucial in the battle against international terrorism. The USG identifies with the struggle facing the LAF: "your fight is our fight." The U.S. is showing its support by the rapid delivery of 5.56mm ammunition rounds to reinforce the fighting capability of the LAF.

13. (C) General Sleiman agreed with the stakes in LAF success against Fatah al-Islam. He indicated that this is a crucial time for the credibility of the LAF, which needs be seen as the main government entity which can maintain security in the country. He felt that success in the battle with Fatah al-Islam would determine how the Lebanese public saw the LAF and Lebanon as a nation. He expressed his appreciation for

the quick response in providing much needed 5.56mm ammunition to the LAF and for the ongoing USG effort to secure 105mm tank rounds and 155mm artillery rounds. He recognized the intense efforts of USG in ensuring that the LAF has the required munitions and equipment to succeed. (Note: The first C-17 flight landed at Beirut International Airport today, delivering approximately \$6 million worth of 5.56mm ammunition. End Note.)

LAF HAS PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR MILITARY ACTION,
BUT DOUBTS SOME POLITICAL LEADER'S INTENTIONS

¶4. (C) Sleiman said that in a recent meeting, March 14 leaders indicated their strong support for the LAF to take military action against Fatah al-Islam in the Nahr el-Bared camp. He also felt that there was "wide support" among the Lebanese public. Sleiman confided that his main worry was that some political leaders might "take sides" and use the military action in the Nahr al-Bared to push their own political agenda. This would split public support and in the end would be used to criticize the LAF for its military actions. For this reason, he would like to see more "public support" expressed for the LAF from the Biqa area and Sidon, where sympathy of the Palestinian cause is strongest.

MILITARY ACTION ONLY REAL OPTION

¶5. (C) Sleiman made it clear that he saw Fatah al-Islam as a criminal terrorist group using Nahr el-Bared as a base for violent action. He did not think that Fatah al-Islam would surrender peacefully, in light of its militant stance and the unwillingness of its leaders to negotiate. This left only

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one option: the LAF must go into Nahr el-Bared and "kill the leaders" of Fatah al-Islam. Sleiman indicated that another reason the LAF needed to take military action was to show the "willingness of the LAF soldier to fight and not retreat."

LAF USING FATAH AND OTHER PALESTINIAN GROUPS

¶6. (C) Sleiman indicated that the LAF, on his instruction, is using other Palestinian groups, including Fatah, to go into the camp and gather intelligence on Fatah al-Islam. He told the Ambassador that for "the first time," the LAF has been paying Palestinian groups to go into the camp and gather information. Sleiman added he had put a \$200,000 bounty on Fatah al-Islam leader Shar al-Absi or members of his inner circle.

MEASURING OUTSIDE PALESTINIAN
SUPPORT FOR FATAH AL-ISLAM

¶7. (C) According to Sleiman there are about 6,000 civilians still left in the refugee camp (which is a lower number than that provided by UNRWA, which estimated 8,000-10,000 civilians remain). While Sleiman is concerned for civilian casualties in the event of military operations, he emphasized that his primary responsibility is force protection for the army. He was concerned that going into Nahr al-Bared could generate Palestinian violence in other camps. The LAF could be faced with further military challenges that put soldiers at risk. LAF and ISF intelligence reports have indicated that if the LAF attacks Nahr al-Bared, Fatah al-Islam could rally the support of about 1,000 fighters from other Palestinian camps.

COMMENT

¶8. (C) There is little doubt that General Sleiman is

committed to continuing the fight against Fatah al-Islam, but he seemed hesitant about moving faster on taking military action in Nahr el-Bared. Throughout the meeting, the Ambassador made multiple attempts to convey to Sleiman the urgent need to move quickly while public sentiment is strongly behind the LAF, especially among the Sunni community. The longer the LAF puts off military confrontation against Fatah al-Islam, the more that public support for military action will start to dwindle. Also, if the LAF does not act now, it would be hard to justify its request for urgent processing of USG military assistance in the future. End Comment.

FELTMAN